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AUTHOR Sabandar, Jacob
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ABSTRACT

The English language teaching situation at Universitas '45, a recently opened private university in Indonesia, is described and compared to that at Hasanuddin University, a more established, public university nearby. The situation at Universitas '45 is characterized by increasingly large student numbers and a severe teacher shortage. Teachers have complained about large classes, and it has been found to be impossible to reconcile the achievement of the university's objectives with the actual classroom situation. This has led to declining achievement, threatening the institution's popularity. Relaxing academic standards has improved student motivation, but class size prevents teachers from capitalizing on it. Negotiation with the institution's administrators about class size requires great delicacy, and the largest obstacle is the widespread perception that large classes constitute a problem that is neither interesting nor soluble. A survey of 28 lecturers at Universitas '45 concerning classroom management, teaching and learning, evaluating students' progress, time allocation, and instructional aids suggests that the problems of large classes seriously affect classroom management. Solutions to those problems are urgently needed. (MSE)

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LANGUAGE LEARNING IN LARGE CLASSES

RESEARCH PROJECT

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN LARGE CLASSES IN INDONESIA

JACOB SABANDAR

PROJECT REPORT NO. 9

Jacob Sabandar
Language Learning in Large Classes in Indonesia

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Lancaster-Leeds
Language Learning in Large Classes
Research Project

Overseas Education Unit
School of Education
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT
U.K.

Tel : 0532-334569
Telex : 556473 UNILDS G
Fax : 0532-336017

Department of Linguistics
and Modern English Language
University of Lancaster
Lancaster LA1 4YT
U.K.

Tel : 0524-65201
Telex : 65111 LANCUL G
Fax : 0524-63806

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1 Introduction(1)

It is beyond my authority to deal with anything so grand as 'language learning in large classes in Indonesia'. Sometimes labels like 'in Indonesia' are used simply for the sake of convenience. Coleman (Project Report No. 4, 1989) says :

> We have used the labels 'Mali', for example, or 'Indonesia' for the sake of convenience, but we are under no illusions that the data which we have available provide a representative picture of the situations obtaining in those countries.

For this reason, in this report I have decided to discuss one particular university in Indonesia, Universitas '45, so that I can deal with a clearly identified and defined situation. I will also make some references to another university with which I have connections, Hasanuddin University. At the same time, what I have to say probably applies reasonably well to other universities in Eastern Indonesia. All of them are involved in similar attempts to deal with class size.

In Section 2, I describe various aspects of the English language teaching situation in Universitas '45. I then go on, in Section 3, to analyse responses by the English teaching staff of the university to a questionnaire survey. Finally, I draw some conclusions from my analysis of the situation and from the questionnaire research.

2 English Teaching In Universitas '45

Universitas '45 is a private university in the city of Ujung Pandang, the capital of the province of South Sulawesi. The university was established only very recently. At the time of writing (1988) it is in its second year. When it was opened in June 1986, the university admitted 4000 students, and last year, 1987, it accepted 2000 new students. Therefore it currently has 6000 students enrolled. Next academic year the number of students is expected to reach 10,000. This number is not very surprising, considering that the country's population is about 175,000,000 at present. Also, the scarcity of reasonably good educational institutions has been the main reason for the influx of students to a particularly good university.

Next academic year, about 6000 students will take the compulsory English One and English Two programmes. If we had 30 students in a group, as the normal standard prescribes, then we would have to cater for 200 groups or classes. Though the University could meet the financial consequences of such a decision, it simply would not be able to provide the required number of English teachers to teach so many groups. The scarcity of English teachers and the constantly growing number of students are serious problems for a country like Indonesia.

The other university with which I am asscciated, Hasanuddin University, is a state university in the same city of Ujung

Pandang. Hasanuddin University used to have classes of 150 for service English, but this number has been reduced to 50 over the years. However, the attempt to reduce class size has brought with it some undesirable consequences. For example, to provide teachers, the English programme has to employ recent graduates of the English Department who are willing to take up the job temporarily while waiting for a better and more permanent post. The programme at Hasanuddin University has also gone so far as to appoint final year students of the English Department to cope with the shortage of teachers. But these two groups of very young and junior teachers come and go. The university cannot appoint them as tenured teaching staff members because of bureaucratic regulations. So the success of Hasanuddin University in reducing class size is based on what is only a partial solution. In any case this solution cannot be applied in Universitas '45 as this is an institution which is still in its infancy and which does not yet have graduates of its own.

The reason behind the efforts we have been exerting at Universitas '45 to get the class size reduced has been the constant and continuous complaints against large classes voiced by the teachers of English. What is strange is that the failure of the programme to achieve its pedagogical objectives has never been used as the basis for reducing class size. The objectives - which comprise profitably making use of English textbooks and exploiting available language skills to efficiently serve basic functional communication - do not show any sign of ever having

been achieved. Classes are too large, time allocated cannot be profitably exploited, and materials do not cater for the objectives. The University Board has categorically stated that if the English Programme of Universitas '45 cannot serve the students' academic needs, then the programme itself is a waste of time, energy and money. The teachers have reacted to the prescribed objectives by arguing that these are too ambitious for classes of 100 to 125 students. Basing their arguments on years of experience, they have repeatedly emphasized that the objectives are simply not within reach unless class size is reduced. What has made things worse, they add, is that there is not a single textbook on the market that is specifically written for large classes. And non-native speaker teachers of English, unfortunately, have difficulty being creative with textbooks. We can hardly expect them to do anything other than what the textbooks prescribe.

The achievements of the programme at Universitas '45 have not been satisfactory. This can clearly be seen by looking at the results of the semester tests. At first, no more than 30% of students passed these tests, and this created severe consequences both for the students and for the university. The university ran the risk of becoming seriously unpopular. The proportion of students passing the test speaks for the life or death of a university, especially of a private university. The only solution to the problem - hopefully only a temporary one - has been to modify the criteria for success in the semester tests.

The pass mark can no longer be made to depend on test results, or on active group participation, or on assignment grades, but rather on test *participation*, the regularity of class attendance, and on the total number of assignments submitted. These modified criteria have boosted the percentage of students who have passed the semester tests for the last three semesters from 30% to approximately 80%.

This may seem a rather extreme step to have taken. However, looking at it from the other side of the coin - the bright side - the modified criteria have revealed the following :

a 80% of the students now attend classes very regularly

b 80% of the students now faithfully submit their assignments

c 80% of them are now quite interested in English

d 80% of them have bought the course books despite their financial difficulties.

In other words, by making it much easier for students to pass the semester tests, we have created a situation where student motivation is now much greater. The four new phenomena (regular attendance at lessons, performance of assignments, increased motivation, and availability of materials) are undoubtedly essential requirements for successful language teaching and learning. And so, as a consequence of having ***relaxed*** the test criteria, we find ourselves in a situation where student learning is increasing.

It is interesting to know what the teachers themselves say about this evidence. During staff meetings they often observe that were it not for crowded classes, the objectives would now be well within reach. That is to say, the teachers recognise that our policy of relaxing the test criteria has brought about improvements, but that class size is still a major problem which prevents us from achieving our objectives.

In my recent report to the University Board, for by no means the first time I brought the problem of class size to their attention. Actually, my experience and perception indicate that we must be very cautious in bargaining with university administrators about class size. We must not go to extremes. The problems of money, of an unconvincing academic programme and its results, of the absence of suitable course materials, of conservatism, of bureaucracy, of indifference, of slowness to change, of ignorance, of the lack of qualified teachers, of the annual influx of new students - and other difficulties - all get in the way of reducing class size.

Perhaps the biggest problem of all is the *attitude*, identified by Jon Roberts of Reading University and quoted by Coleman (Project Report No. 2, 1989), that the phenomenon of large classes does not deserve attention because it is seen as being (i) theoretically uninteresting and (ii) insoluble; the only solution is to avoid having large classes. But, as Coleman

says, the large class phenomenon is widespread and unlikely to go away; turning our backs on it seems cowardly and dishonest.

To summarise, in this Section I have described a situation which is characterised by large - and rapidly increasing - student numbers and by a severe shortage of teachers. Teachers have complained bitterly about the size of their classes, and it has been found impossible to reconcile achievement of the objectives laid down by the university with the actual classroom situation. This has led to falling achievement, which in turn has threatened the popularity of the university. A partial solution to this problem has been found by relaxing the evaluation criteria applied in semester tests. This has led to an upsurge in student motivation, but teachers still find that class size prevents them from capitalising on the learners' motivation. To make the situation even more difficult, experience has shown that negotiating with university administrators over the question of class size requires considerable delicacy. The biggest stumbling block of all is the widespread perception that large classes constitute a problem which is neither interesting nor soluble.

3 Attitudes Of Universitas '45 Lecturers To Large Classes

Large classes are indeed problematic. What follows is a preliminary analysis of data collected from 28 lecturers at

Universitas '45. These teachers responded to a questionnaire developed by the Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Group. The questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix 1.

I analysed the responses to the first question in the questionnaire which dealt with the problems posed by large classes. Respondents were asked to complete the following statement :

> **Large classes** make it difficult for me to do what I would like to do because ...

The 28 respondents provided 35 statements in all. Looking at the responses to this item from the point of view of teaching and learning constraints, I have classified the statements into the following categories : (A) Classroom Management, (B) Teaching and Learning, (C) Evaluation of Students' Progress, (D) Time Allocation, and (E) Teaching Aids. These categories are given below, together with all the 35 responses.

A Classroom Management

1 It is difficult or even impossible to give your attention to individual students.

2 It is difficult to check the students' individual assignment.

3 Students cannot be given equal share of class activities.

4 Students are difficult to organize.

5 Students are difficult to manage.

6 Half of the class may feel neglected and do other things.

7 It is difficult to cater for individual needs.

8 It is difficult to know whether students participate or not.

9 Students sitting in the back or far from the teacher miss the lessons, and so they sometimes leave the room.

10 It is difficult to create a maximally effective relationship between the teacher, the students, and the class resources.

11 It is difficult to establish contact with the students.

12 Students are too noisy.

13 The noises made by some students distracts or diverts the attention of others.

14 It is difficult to control the students.

15 It is difficult to know the students individually.

16 Teachers cannot easily move around.

17 It is extremely difficult to reset the classroom; though split, the groups are still too large.

18 Quiet and good classroom situation cannot be maintained throughout.

19 I do not have enough experience to deal with large classes.

20 Range of individual problems increases as number of students increases.

B Teaching and Learning

1 It is impossible to develop the students' oral skills.

2 It is impossible to know whether the explanations given can be absorbed by the students.

3 Large classes discourage the teachers from giving adequate explanations.

4 Communicative skills cannot be well developed.

5 My voice cannot carry far enough.

C Evaluation of Students' Progress

1 It is impossible to check the students' oral skills.

2 It is hard to monitor students' individual progress.

3 It is difficult to know students' individual achievement.

4 It is difficult to assess students' individual achievement.

5 It is difficult to achieve the objective.

D Time allocation

1 There is no time for individual practice.

2 Time is too limited to cater for the needs of large crowds.

3 Time is too limited to deal with the prescribed materials.

4 Correcting and marking assignments is too time consuming.

E Teaching Aids

1 Facilities are scarce or even non-existent.

Clearly, some of these statements are duplicated, and some of them also fit into more than one category. Nevertheless, I believe that the categorisation given above is reasonably valid. Twenty responses concerned classroom management (57% of all responses); 5 statements concerned teaching and learning (14% of all responses); another 5 statements concerned evaluation (14%); 4 responses related to time allocation (11%); and 1 comment mentioned teaching aids (3%).

This simple analysis of the attitudes to large classes of English teachers at Universitas '45 - specifically their identification of the characteristics of large classes which make it difficult for them to do what they would like to do - indicates that the problems most seriously affect classroom management. Thus we can end this section with a question : If

teachers cannot successfully manage their classes, what success are we to expect from them?

4 Conclusions

The conclusions that can be drawn from this brief discussion are as follows :

1 So far, the main reason behind our attempts to reduce class size, both at Hasanuddin University and at Universitas '45, has been the constant complaints voiced by the teachers that their classes are too crowded.

2 It is very likely that both Hasanuddin University and Universitas '45 refrain from allocating more hours to English because their English programmes have never yielded convincing results. This conclusion may also apply to other universities. The failure to achieve satisfactory results in turn can be attributed to class size. Similarly, the limited time available makes it more difficult to achieve reasonable results. And so we find ourselves in a vicious circle.

3 Some bargaining with administrators over class size can be resorted to, but it has to be done cautiously.

4 An English class of 30 students sounds too ideal, too ambitious, and even impossible for the foreseeable future.

5 There is a strong and urgent need to devise and write specific materials for large classes. These may have to differ from country to country because of differing needs and academic systems.

6 Non-native speaker teachers of English cannot be as creative as their native speaker counterparts in their handling of teaching materials because they themselves still face problems with their English.

7 The need for a solution to the teaching of English in large classes is pressing.

8 Facts have shown that there is a strong desire among the students of Hasanuddin University and Universitas '45 to learn English.

9 The main problems that make it difficult for the teachers of English at Universitas '45 (and probably other universities as well) to do what they would like to do are related to classroom management.

Without doubt, solutions to the problems of teaching English in large classes are needed urgently. Once again, I wish to emphasize that the situation I am referring to is our situation in Indonesia.

Note

1 This paper was first presented in the Colloquium 'Language Learning and Teaching in Large Classes : Current Research' which was held during the 1988 TESOL Convention in Chicago. My participation in the Colloquium was made possible with assistance from the British Council and the Hornby Trust. I am particularly grateful to Tony Crocker and to Clive Taylor for their assistance.

Appendix 1 : Questionnaire

Many teachers say that teaching English in large classes is a problem for them. But in what way are large classes a problem? How do large classes stop teachers from doing what they would like to do? Your responses to this questionnaire will help us to answer these questions.

Under each of the following, please list as many points as you can.

1 **Large classes** make it difficult for me to do what I would like to do because :

2 With an **ideal** number of students in my class, I could :

3 When I am teaching a **large class**, I help my students to learn English by :

4 Do you have any other comments or questions about teaching and learning in **large classes**?

5 Is the institution you teach in (please ring the appropriate letter) :

primary/elementary? a
secondary? b
college/university? c
other (please specify)? d

6 In principle, would you be willing to help us with future research into large classes (perhaps by responding to another questionnaire)? **YES/NO**

Thank you very much for your help.

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Project Coordinators

Hywel Coleman
Overseas Education Unit
School of Education
University of Leeds
Leeds LS2 9JT
U.K.

Tel : 0532-334569
Telex : 556473 UNILDS G
Fax : 0532-336017

Dick Allwright
Department of Linguistics
and Modern English Language
University of Lancaster
Lancaster LA1 4YT
U.K.

Tel : 0524-65201
Telex : 65111 LANCUL G
Fax : 0524-63806

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